

**‘CROSSING OVER’ THE (BLURRED) LINES AMONG REALITY, VIRTUALITY,
AND THEATRICALITY: A CYBERPSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF
THE NETHER BY JENNIFER HALEY**

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ABSTRACT

*The advancement of technology, especially the online world on the internet, has brought a new dimension to the life and psychology of the people. Jennifer Haley’s play *The Nether* takes this fact into consideration and employs the impact of the internet, i.e. the virtual world, in the real or the physical world as its subject matter. This paper investigates and maps the boundaries of the worlds – real, virtual, and theatrical – presented in the play and examines their relationships with one another, and then claims that the lines between these three realities actually overlap with one another. With the exploration of the characters’ psyche, this paper argues that the characters transcend the normal boundaries of the real, the imaginary or virtual, and the theatrical, creating a new reality in the age of advanced technology. To ground its arguments, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary framework to discuss the play – it explains the play in the light of the cyberpsychoanalytical theory, an interdisciplinary study of the psychoanalytic literary theory and cyberpsychology.*

KEYWORDS: *Cyberpsychology, Virtual Reality, Psychoanalytical Theory & Sci-Fi Drama*

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INTRODUCTION

Jennifer Haley, an award-winning American playwright who was born and raised in Texas and educated at the University of Texas at Austin and Brown University, and who now lives in Los Angeles, wrote her most-known play *The Nether* in the opening years of 2010s against the backdrop of the incessantly growing addiction of people towards the internet and its illusory realm. In this play, she embodies the contemporary burning issues created by the internet and technology – issues of the place and influence of the internet in the life of individual, issues of the relationship between the (dark) desires people have in the real or physical world and the fulfillment of them in the world of the internet. To employ these issues, she portrays the internet in its next form in the future as ‘the Nether’ which is, as Rizzolo (2014) in her article in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, on the interview she took of Jennifer Haley says, “a virtual reality world where you can live out your every fantasy in complete anonymity. Identities are blurred, dreams real, and culpability seemingly nonexistent.” Professor Bay-Cheng (2015) considers this as “a rumination on the moral and ethical implications of living in alternate and artificial realities” (p. 689). Thus the play abounds in the elements of growing tension on the conception of reality and virtuality, and on how this conception is presented on the stage. The main points of focus of this play, then, are issues related to the real world, which mainly refers to the physical world, and the virtual world, which in other words could be expressed as cyberspace, and especially the relationship between these two worlds. And as all these things are depicted in the theatre through performance by the actors, there emerges another reality – the reality of the theatre or theatricality. My point in this

article is that while these three realities seem to be different from one another, they are in the case of *The Nether* intimately related to one another, and there are hardly any lines separating them, or if any, those are blurred – so blurred that to differentiate them becomes quite impossible for the audiences. I base my logic on an interdisciplinary investigation of the play – I analyze the play by employing psychoanalytical literary theory, and the theory of cyberpsychology, a recent field in psychology. I formulate my discussion on four basic points. At first, I apply the Freudian psychoanalytical theory to the play to explain the ways the characters behave and the hidden reasons behind their behaviors. Then, I link the behaviors of the characters with cyberpsychological theory by which I make an effort to map the boundaries of the real or physical world and the cyberspace or virtual world. After that, in the third part, I investigate the way the playwright delineates the line between the real and the virtual, the way this line becomes blurred, the way this line plays with the consciousness of the audience, and the way this line leads the audience to be aware of another world – the world of theatre. Thus, finally, I try to map the relationship between the real, the virtual and the theatrical – how they overlap one another and make their boundaries blurred to form a new theatrical experience.

More than Einstein or Watson and Crick, more than Hitler or Lenin, Roosevelt or Kennedy, more than a Picasso, Eliot, or Stravinsky, more than the Beatles or Bob Dylan, Freud's influence on modern culture has been profound and long-lasting. (Kihlstrom, 2015)

Thus we have Professor Kihlstrom admitting the influence of Freudian theory in his essay “Is Freud Still Alive? No, Not Really” which was aimed at refuting and negating the implications of the Freudian ideas in the present technologically and scientifically advanced times. In that very short essay, Kihlstrom (2015) further says of Freudian theory, “Whereas Copernicus showed that the Earth did not lie at the center of the universe, and Darwin showed that humans were descended from “lower” animals, Freud claimed to show that human experience, thought, and action was determined not by our conscious rationality, but by irrational forces outside our conscious awareness and control - forces when could only be understood, and controlled, by an extensive therapeutic process he called psychoanalysis.” Thus from these two statements about Kihlstrom’s points on Freud and Freudian theories, it is evident that Freudian explanation of human behavior (human experience, thought, and action) is influential even in contemporary times when humans experience a diverse behavioral pattern not only in their so-called real or physical world or space, but, in addition, also in a world or space which, termed ‘virtual world’, ‘cyberspace’, or ‘cyber-reality’, has eventually become an indispensable part of their life. And so obviously is it possible to explain the overt-addiction of people to the internet, their online identities and activities (and reasons behind these), and their relationships in the virtual world in light of Freudian psychoanalytical theory. In the same way, Haley’s play *The Nether* which “explores the moral and psychological implications of human relationships in an increasingly technological age” (Rizzolo, 2014) can easily be viewed psychoanalytically on the points of the condition of human mind – conscious and unconscious, interpretation of dreams and imaginations, defense mechanisms like repression and regression, etc. An evaluation of storyline, characterization, dialogue, action, and stagecraft of the play will give us a broad picture of this view.

Questioned about the ideas behind the writing of the play, Haley told the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “It’s funny, too, because these ideas really came from a subconscious place, but when I started researching, I found so much material about this theme of living out our imaginations. And should people be allowed to live in a place of imagination even if it’s a very horrible place?” (Rizzolo, 2014) The working on the ideas of ‘subconscious’ and ‘imagination’ which basically are Freudian is thus at the core of this play. And in the play evidence of this is found from the opening scene

onwards; for example, when Sims threatens Morris of his lawyers and tells her that she will not be able to “keep me out for long”-

MORRIS: Long enough to locate and detain your children.

SIMS:

MORRIS: What’s wrong, Mr. Sims?

SIMS:

MORRIS: I thought you didn’t have any children.

SIMS: (Haley, 2015, p.7)

The pauses of the Sims here and in many other places in the play are a reflection of his unconscious self. As the story unfolds we will explore that Morris’s mention of the word ‘children’ makes Sims think unconsciously of so many things. There are many other instances of the working of the unconscious in the behavior of almost all the few characters of the play. Detective Morris herself is entangled with her unconscious. Though, she enters the Hideaway with a view to looking into the “heavy charges” of “Solicitation, Rape. Sodomy. Murder” (Haley, 2015, p.6), against Sims, she visits Iris frequently evidently, in spite of her refusal to accept this fact, owing to her attraction toward Iris and probably the Hideaway.

But the character of Sims deserves utmost attention in case of the Freudian psychoanalytical theory. Sims is the revelation of a person who is torn by his powerful but immoral urges. As it is found in Freudian theory that humans are always driven by some urges which are active in human life since their birth. Another thing is that the unconscious is always at work creating numerous urges, or wishes irrespective of legal or illegal, moral or immoral, good or bad, right or wrong, and the task of the conscious is to repress and keep repressed, the ones which are illegal, immoral, bad, or wrong in the view of society. These situations are evident in Sims’ character. We have an explanation of Sims’ attraction towards children –

Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure. No amount of cognitive behavioral therapy or relapse deterrent or even chemical castration will sway me from my urges toward children. I am sick and no matter how much I loved him or her I would make my own child sick and I see this, I see this – not all of us see this – but I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. (Haley, 2015, p.15)

Here Sims is quite elaborate on the victimizing nature of the dark parts of the human psyche. Later in the play, Sims reiterates, “The urge, Detective – the *urge* – as long as we are sentient, you will never stamp that out.” (original italics) (Haley, 2015, p. 30) And finally, we find Sims making a blatant confession of his obsession with children-

There was a real little girl who is the daughter of my neighbor, down the street. We would gettogether in person then. This was a long time ago. I couldn’t stop thinking about her. She had hair the sun played in. And a laugh that came out of her like magic. I wanted to... get inside. I pretended to be her friend. I posed to her family as a young, harmless uncle-type. One night I got her alone in her own room. We were laughing, and I reached over and grabbed her, and she looked at me – so startled – and I... found it in myself to let her go. I went home, to my computer, and that’s where I’ve stayed. (Haley, 2015, p.71)

In the conditions of Sims, we find the working of the ‘urges’ or ‘drives’ in human action. Sims is also struggling with his defense mechanism; at least repression and regression are to be found in here. He probably at first tried to repress the thought of the neighbor girl, the failure of which caused him to take refuge in regression. He thus, created the Hideaway as a psychological refuge, where he could be himself, just like he says to Morris – It’s imagination! People should be free in their own imagination! That is one place, at least, where they should have total privacy!” (Haley, 2015, p. 31) Iris takes this view a bit further – “We offer a place where you may dismantle everything the world has told you about right and wrong and discover pure relationship.” (Haley, 2015, p. 55) Thus haunted by carnal urges, and in order to escape from the haunt in the real world, Sims established the Hideaway in the ‘Nether’ or internet – the cyberspace which eventually becomes his psychological space.

With the advance of computers and online networks - especially the internet - a new dimension of human experience is rapidly opening up... the experience created by computers and computer networks can in many ways be understood as a psychological "space". (Suler, 1999-2005)

And *The Nether* takes us to such a world of ‘computers and online networks’, which is obviously more ‘advanced’ in case of technological development than the world Professor Suler thought of in his hypertext book *The Psychology of Cyberspace* (1999-2005) from which I coin the phrase “Cyberspace as Psychological Space”. In fact, Haley’s world is in the future, which she expresses by a single word “Soon” (Haley, 2015, p. 2) – the world, which is dystopian, or no more normal in the contemporary sense, the world where the internet has turned to be ‘the Nether’, and the world where “the Nether becomes our contextual framework of being” (Haley, 2015, p. 13). In this world, the ‘experience’ of humans created by the Nether ‘can in many ways be understood as a psychological space’ – the phenomenon which is overtly found especially in the case of the Hideaway created by Sims who is known as Papa in this ‘psychological space’ of him. The Hideaway, which we would recognize as a role-playing game on the internet (here the Nether), where a user adopts an avatar as her/his identity remaining anonymous all the time and can be her/his true self by playing with children, having a sensual relationship with them, and even crashing them with an ax – all “outside of consequence” (Haley, 2015, p. 18), is the place which is actually the creation of Sims’s psychological desperation-

Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure... I am sick and no matter how much I loved him or her I would make my own child sick... I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbor’s children and my brother’s children and the children I won’t allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because I’ve created a place where I can be my fucking self! (Haley, 2015, p.15)

Thus Sims reveals that he created the Hideaway to fulfill his “in-world” pedophilia. He even describes the Hideaway as “a beautiful home”, “a beautiful family” and “a sympathetic community”. (Haley, 2015, p. 18) And this plan of him also works for the visitors, which is confirmed by both Doyle, who plays the role of the young girl Iris in the Hideaway and Morris, who enters the Hideaway as Woodnut, as Doyle says to Morris, “Your agent listed facts in his report. But the next time you have a chat by the water cooler, don’t ask him, *what did you see? What did you do? Ask him, How did you feel?*” (Original italics, Haley, 2015, p. 24)

And the audiences are quite confirmed of the feeling of Morris or Woodnut, from the appreciation of the environment of the Hideaway by Morris, which she does as Woodnut and her repeated visits there. As Bay-Cheng (2015) says, “Morris pursues both Sims and Doyle as an undercover agent named Mr. Woodnut, ultimately revealing her own and everyone else’s dark desires.” (p. 691) It is also evident in Morris’s own words with Sims –

SIMS: People come to my realm of their own free will.

MORRIS: They're enticed by its beauty. By sensations they can no longer experience in the real world.

SIMS: Is it my problem the real world no longer measures up? (Haley, 2015, p.29)

To come to the point of pedophilia, as it is illegal and even inhumane in the real physical world, Sims's point is worth mentionable – "Are you accusing me of creating pedophiles? If anything, I'm giving them a place to blow off steam." (Haley, 2015, p.30)

And it is quite validated by Doyle –

MORRIS: The Hideaway is wrong.

DOYLE: It draws people who are – broken – I know that, but – I don't judge them – they are part of us, too – they are part of the world – God does not judge them – why should we? (Halley, 2015, p.59)

Here what Doyle means is that people in the real world have dark desires which are not fulfilled there, and this limitation makes those having them 'broken', who then turn to the Hideaway. So, if their existence is to be recognized, so are to be their desire. But this is not granted in the real world. Consequently, the Nether realm, and particularly the Hideaway, is their psychological refuge.

Their condition is also comparable to what Suler (1999-2005) tells "alternative to dreaming". To express this, Suler (1999-2005) says –

People may be attracted to such virtual environments because - like dreams - they satisfy this need for an alternative view of reality by encouraging the unconscious, primary process styles of thinking. Like dreams, they also encourage the acting out of unconscious fantasies and impulses, which may explain some of the sexuality, aggression, and imaginative role playing us, see on the internet.

Almost all the issues Suler presents here are applicable to Sims, Morris, and Doyle. These three actually blend their conscious and unconscious realities by going back and forth between the Hideaway and 'in-world'. The Hideaway is thus true for Sims, Doyle, and Morris of what Suler (1999-2005) tells of cyberspace –

Cyberspace is not simply an "information super-highway," It can offer the human psyche much more than facts. Virtual space can flex the boundaries of conscious and unconscious realities. It can tell us something about the meaning of "real".

Thus the worlds of *The Nether* are hard to distinguish; the line between them is blurred. This is evident in the very opening conversation between Sims and Morris when Morris plays with Sims's notion of home and family, indicating whether they are 'in-world' or virtual –

SIMS: I want to go home.

Morris: Which home?

SIMS: I need to speak with my family.

Morris: Which family? (Halley, 2015, p.5)

Bay-Cheng (2015) thus rightly regards the Nether realm as "a futuristic version of the internet expanded into a

virtual and immersive environment that is sensually indistinguishable from reality” (p. 690). The influence of the Nether or the virtual world in the physical world of this play is so profound that it ‘becomes our contextual framework for being’ –

Just because it’s virtual doesn’t mean it isn’t real. Eighty percent of the population works in office realms; children attend school in educational realms. There’s a realm for anything you want to do or think you might want to try. As the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being, don’t you think it’s a bit out of date to say it isn’t real? (Haley, 2015, p.13)

Obviously, the grasp of the Nether here is so profound that to try to distinguish the real from the virtual is totally ‘out of date’. Haley herself says in her interview in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, quoting Carl Jung that “the world of dreams and imagination is a different reality, but it’s just as real as our physical reality” (Rizzolo, 2014).

However, though Halley presents her view to us through a fictional world, Professor Campbell (2017) provides a remarkable reasoning on the issues of reality and virtuality, on the basis of his analysis of the contemporary ‘real’ world. He says –

It is not that there are two separate realities: physical reality (real, significant, and meaningful) and virtual reality (imaginary, less significant, and less meaningful), but that there is one real, significant, and meaningful reality, some of which is physical and some of which is virtual. (Original italics, p. 304)

In formulating his theory, Campbell argues that the reality which we call now virtual reality has actually been existed from time immemorial – just the same ideas Haley (2015) depicts through Morris in this play-

Images – ideas – create reality. Everything around us – our houses, our bridges, our wars, our peace treaties – began as figments in someone’s mind before becoming a physical or social fact. (p.30)

Campbell’s view negates the differentiation between ‘in-world’ reality and the reality in the Nether or the Hideaway in this play. And to base his stand he provides us with some arguments –

We speak of our online experiences as virtual experiences with virtual friends who are intimately sharing their lives with... with... strangers? No, it is the sharing of information that builds bonds of real friendship between people, not the proximity of bodies... Friends are those you care about who also care about you, and this caring and sharing within real and meaningful relationships is not exclusively or even primarily generated by the proximity of physical bodies. (Campbell, 2017, p.304)

And of ‘the proximity of physical bodies’, which actually refers to physical sound, smell and touch, Halley’s play abounds in elements blending them in between the Hideaway and ‘in-world’. In their debate about the representation of Iris in the Hideaway, when Doyle says to Morris that Iris is merely an ‘image of a little girl’, Morris’s reply then is worth-noticing-

It’s more than that, Mr. Doyle. Its sound, smell, touch. The Hideaway is the most advanced realm there is when it comes to the art of sensation. (Haley, 2015, p.22)

Morris further confirms this to Sims, when she says –

You don’t just offer images of children. You provide the sound and the smell and the touch of them. (Haley, 2015, p.31)

Thus Campbell would tell of the situation of Sims and Doyle that as they could not fulfill their wishes in the so-called physical world and as they can do those in the virtual world or the Hideaway, these two worlds, considering their ability to hold the people and people's psyche, are "all equally real". (Campbell, 2017, p.305) They seem to be different because –

Each of these reality frames contains its own rule-set that defines what we can and cannot do there; each has its own range of perceptions and interactions, intents and choices, value and purpose. Each enriches our life with useful experience. (Campbell, 2017, p.304)

Campbell's view could be strengthened by the view of Propat (2016) who says, "The nature of action in virtual worlds is such that our bodies are both present and absent, experiencing agency and aspects of sensation even though there is no direct contact between flesh and world." (p.359)

In *The Nether*, we find Morris expressing a quite same view regarding the human body when she says to Sims that they "can't control a person's body. Yours (Sims's) is free to walk out the door." (Haley, 2015, p. 6) Doyle even goes further to say, "Our bodies are ninety-nine percent spaces." (Haley, 2015, p. 22) This means at the time of the nether realm, physical bodies are of less importance, it matters little whether these are present and absent. This fact is further proved when we have the situation of 'crossing over', the process to enter into and remain in the Nether or more specifically the Hideaway permanently, i.e., in the virtual world, when the body may lie 'in-world', being just a "shade" (Haley, 2015, p. 12), but the person's consciousness floats only in that virtual world. In this play, Doyle is desperate to 'cross' – the desire which he expresses both as Iris and Doyle. In addition, we see this desperation in Sims also and come to know from Morris that her father spent his life in that situation – the reason which she apparently presents as her motive to have an investigation against Sims and the Hideaway. Morris's words work like a prophecy here – "There won't be a distinction when everyone decides they'd rather cross over. We are at the edge of what could become a mass migration into the Nether." (Haley, 2015, p.30)

Now, if we consider that these worlds are shown to us through a play – through the medium of theatre where living persons act out the roles of the fictional world, it is even easier to find the line between reality and virtuality totally blurred. This fact is rightly illustrated by Stowell-Kaplan (2015) –

Although the audience knows that the Hideaway is a virtual space populated by computer-generated approximations of adults and children, the live actors [...] ensure that the distinction between the real and virtual remains blurred. (p.160)

Stowell-Kaplan (2015) also confirms that, "using live performers in both the virtual Hideaway and the "in-world" interrogation room... ensures that, the audience is never quite free of a nagging doubt that, the Hideaway is entirely virtual, entirely unreal—whatever that might mean." (p.160)

The 'nagging doubt' of the audience is heightened in the final scene of the play where the characters Sims and Doyle act out their roles in the Hideaway assuming their real names (Sims and Doyle), not the names they used to assume (Papa and Iris) in the Hideaway. Thus the play "concludes by having its central characters articulate their real feelings in their actual bodies, as if their virtual selves were simply masks that transparently covered the true selves beneath." (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p.692)

Whereas the story of this play may seem apparent to be typical of apocalyptic literature, Haley does not constrict its action within any set rules of such supposition. On the contrary, she goes on to experiment and play with the relationships between form and substance, time and reality, physicality and Virtuality, Virtuality and theatricality, and most importantly among physicality, Virtuality and theatricality. Especially her use of advanced technological props (which are, though, not extensively told by Haley herself, but necessary for production) raises questions and possibilities of technology in theatre or stagecraft. To quote Bay-Cheng (2015), “the play’s realist style lends a metatheatricality to the descriptions of the virtual... Considering a contemporary representational medium that provides sound, smell, and sometimes touch, the theatre is the epitome of a virtual environment...” (p.692) This relationship is best described by Popat (2016) – “Theatre has always been a space of virtuality. The action, on the stage exists as neither what it is actually nor what it is pretending to be; instead, it bridges the actual and the imaginary to create a virtual world [...]” (p.357)

Thus, with the progress of the events of the play we find in “its attention to the representational beauty of the fantasy realm in comparison to the real [,] the Nether appears less and less as a digital construct and increasingly a theatrical one, a space in which the props and costumes of a past era are lushly realized and vicariously, pleurably experienced” (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 692). The frequent shifting of scenes from the interrogation room to the Hideaway in the Nether and vice versa startles the audiences regarding their consciousness of different realities. The acting of the real people in the Hideaway, where the actors are supposed to be avatars, further entices the audiences to be entangled in a puzzle about their perception of realities. And finally in the last scene which Haley titles as ‘Epilogue’, the lines between reality, Virtuality and theatricality become totally blurred when the Hideaway characters Papa and Iris converse each other in their ‘in-world’, that is, theatrical identities of Sims and Doyle, pushing the audiences deep into the maze of their realization of realities. Stowell-Kaplan (2015) is appropriate here –

And yet, *The Nether* seems to ask, just how distinct is theatre from reality? For just as the virtual world of the Hideaway seems tethered to the “in-world” reality of its participants, so too is [its] theatrical production imbedded within our own world, thus complicating anything that would claim it as merely illusion. (p.160-1)

Based on this situation Bay-Cheng (2015) considers Haley’s handling of stagecraft as “a theatrical future driven by technology. As the natural world decays, our virtual environments will become desirable only insofar as they become theatrically real.” (p.693) Thus in Stowell-Kaplan’s (2015) word, it could be said that “by playing at the limits of theatre and reality *The Nether* forces its audience to entertain the idea that a virtual realm entirely divorced from our own reality might be an impossibility.” (p.162) Hence, comes the question of the separateness or the togetherness of the realities – physical, virtual, and theatrical. From the discussion above it is evident that, the lines among these realities are very unlikely to exist in case of the psychological and behavioral pattern of the characters of *The Nether*. Furthermore, the psychological journey of the characters confirms the people’s ability to transcend or ‘cross over’ the boundaries of these worlds.

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